

## "The Origin of Emma And Nora"

Gustave Flaubert and Henrik Ibsen are both known as great writers and harsh social critics. In fact when Flaubert's masterpiece *Madame Bovary* was released, he was arrested on the grounds that his novel was morally and religiously offensive to the public, despite the fact that it was a bestseller. Also

Henrik Ibsen's "*A Doll's House*" was such a slap in the face to many Europeans that it was banned in some countries and revised in Germany so that it had a happy ending. Some people in Norway even attributed the rising divorce rate to this play! What is it that drove both of these authors to be such harsh social critics? What exactly were their views? And what drove these two authors to create two of their most famous characters: Nora, from "*A Doll's House*", and Emma from *Madame Bovary*? An insight into the background of these authors reveals that both Nora and Emma are reflections of social and political viewpoints of their authors, and are at least partially based on people that the authors knew.

First of all, it is important to know the socio-economic status and background of the two authors. It is also good to at least have an idea about the society in which they lived. Then it is possible to see why they had certain viewpoints and how these viewpoints had an effect on the personalities and actions of their characters.

Gustave Flaubert was born on December 12, 1821 in Rouen, France to a wealthy surgeon. As a boy he was well aware of the incompetence in the medical profession, and the middle class "lip service" which he portrayed through Homais in *Madame Bovary*. In his college years, Flaubert began to despise the middle class even more as he became enthralled in the romantic writings of Hugo, Rousseau, Lord Byron, and Sir Walter Scott. In *Madame Bovary*, Emma has a certain romantic aspect similar to Flaubert which is a longing for things to be perfect. This perfectionism was arguably an obsession for Flaubert. In fact, it took him 5 years to write *Madame Bovary*. I remember hearing that he even made sketches of the characters' houses and of the town of Yonville. It was also in college that he fell victim to excessive romantic ideals, such as those portrayed

in Emma, and had a failed marriage with an older woman named Elisa Schlesinger. His personal attitudes about love are portrayed through Emma. After his divorce, he entered into a relationship with the poet Louise Colet that was mainly based on letter writing, just as Emma's affairs with Rodolphe and Leon rely heavily on letter writing. In fact, Flaubert and Colet only saw each other

six times in their first two years. This relationship with Miss Colet shows clearly the fact that Gustave Flaubert, like Emma Bovary, liked the idea of having a lover more than actually having one. In 1844, Flaubert started to develop a nervous disorder that forced him to retire to his family's estate. As Flaubert returned to his

provincial lifestyle, he realized how boring it was. It was this boredom and isolation that shined through in Emma Bovary, who was created not only as a representation of Flaubert's romantic longings, but as a universal example of a woman bored with provincial life. His intention was to create a type of character, not a specific individual, and he claimed that Emma was "suffering and weeping at this very moment in twenty villages in France". In fact, Flaubert was once quoted as saying "*Madame Bovary c'est moi*", which in French means "I am *Madame Bovary*". What he meant by saying this was that he possessed some of the romantic traits that Emma did. However, part of Emma was also based off the true story of Eugene Delemaire, who was a student of Flaubert's father and a physician in the French army. After Eugene lost his first wife, he married

Delphine Couturier, who turned out to be unfaithful to him, just as Emma was to Charles. She also died at a very young age, leaving Delemare with many debts and a young child to raise. Eugene, like Charles, died shortly after his wife out of despair.

Nora, like Emma, is a mixture of elements from Henrik Ibsens personal life, as well as a representation of a larger group of people. Unfortunately, Ibsen did not have the best family life. He was born into a fairly wealthy family, but at the age of eight, his parents went bankrupt. Because of this, all of the Ibsen family friends deserted them, and they lived the remainder of their years in social disgrace. Also, Ibsens father was domineering over the family, like Torvald in "A Doll's House". In addition to that, he was an alcoholic. Ibsens mother was similar in some respects to Nora: She was controlled by a domineering husband. However, the character of Nora was not based on Ibsens mother. She probably never dreamed of doing what Nora did. Nora was created partly as a character who tries to reach her individual potential against the will of her society, which was one of the things Ibsen felt he struggled with as a child who was shunned by the rich kids. In fact, because of his family life and economic situation, he left his parents to seek a better life at the age of sixteen, never to return.

Nora was also representative of a larger picture in Europe. She in some aspects represented the educated middle class women who were "flexing their muscles" and questioning the submissive role they had been taught. Ibsen sided with these women who sought to change their traditional role. His views on women's rights were largely influenced by the spirit of political unrest and rebellion that was prevalent in Europe in the 1840's and 50's. During this time, women were striving to gain some of the rights they had been denied for years. They were fed up with not getting an equal education, not being able to vote, not having the ability to own property, and being reduced to "skylarks and butterflies" by their husbands. It was through the character of Nora that Ibsen asserted his idea that the duties of a woman to be herself took precedence over being a faithful wife and mother to her children. It is this fact that probably caused the largest controversy over "A Dolls House". Critics today still argue whether or not Noras decision to leave Torvald was selfish and inconsiderate of her children and husband, or whether it was justified by her circumstance. But controversy was no big deal to Henrik Ibsen. He was quite involved in the political movements of his time.

So the characteristics of Nora and Emma were deeply rooted in the societies which produced their respective authors. Hopefully, it is now clear what the outside influences were upon the authors who created these characters. A combination of family and personal experiences, along with a concern for what was going on in and around the time period of the authors allowed them to create two of the most memorable women in literature and drama.

